

A Context for U.S. Military Readiness

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For our military to be ready to fight effectively – today and in the future – we have to have the right people in the right roles with the right equipment and the right training. How ready we were yesterday determines how well we fight today. How ready we are to fight today determines how well we fight tomorrow.

Congress confronts a unique challenge in meeting its obligations to properly equip American combat forces because most of the preparation for the war in Iraq was based on flawed intelligence and faulty assumptions. Certainly Iraq has distracted the Administration and the military from the original mission of disrupting and destroying al Qaeda. But the larger problem is that Iraq has depleted our force and drained our resources. Today, we face a situation in which military readiness is literally at the breaking point. This is not political hyperbole or partisan rhetoric. It is a fact. It is stark reality.

As Congress moves to repair the damage to our military, there is a context to the challenges we face: finding an exit from Iraq; improving our effectiveness in the real war on terrorists; fixing a broken military; and providing spending oversight so we don't break the country.

President Bush has used Congress as a money spigot, funding military operations through a series of emergency budget requests with no oversight. We have spent money we didn't have and paid for it by raising taxes on our children. That's about to change. Congress must begin funding major recurring war costs through the regular budget process, while ensuring that we can quickly fund real emergencies, real unforeseen expenses and real battlefield needs. The American people can expect items requested by the Pentagon and the Administration in "emergency" supplemental requests to be scrutinized much more closely than in past years.

We understand that wars always give rise to unforeseen circumstances and unexpected needs. However, there will be no more blank checks for defense spending unrelated to battlefield needs. Last year, we asked the Administration to project as many funding needs as possible and include them in the 2008 Defense budget request that goes through the normal authorization and appropriations cycle. Instead, we received the President's request for three separate pots of money for military operations:

- An emergency supplemental request of \$93.4 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan (the 2nd supplemental request in 2007),
- The regular 2008 Defense Budget request of \$481.4 billion, and
- Another emergency supplemental request of \$141.7 billion for 2008 operations in both wars.

Supplemental appropriations are supposed to address emergencies that simply cannot wait for the regular appropriations process, replacing equipment lost or damaged in battle and other "war costs." How is it that we already have an emergency supplemental request to pay for emergencies NEXT year?

The President's 2007 emergency request includes billions of dollars in developmental spending under the guise of "emergency" replacement. Supplemental spending should address emergency needs, not future defense systems that won't help soldiers on the ground for years to come.

How much will it cost for the needs of our war fighters in the field today? How much is needed to develop the weapons systems of tomorrow? Much of our work on the Armed Services Committee is matching our defense needs with their costs.

The most basic strategic concern for U.S. military policy makers are emerging threats pop up around the world. Nobody knows where the next enemy may emerge, or exactly how future wars will be fought. At this moment, we are policing a low intensity conflict in the Balkans, conducting a war against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and trying to referee a civil war in Iraq; all unconventional conflicts. Yet no-one in their right mind would suggest that we longer need forces equipped and trained to defeat an opponent on a conventional battlefield. So, how do we prepare? How do we train? What equipment to do we develop and provide? Clearly, we have to be ready for any eventuality.

Ensuring military readiness is a continuous effort, badly damaged by our overextension in Iraq. Readiness has two dimensions.

Short term readiness addresses the needs of soldiers in the field today. Both Iraq and Afghanistan have been marked by shortages of basic equipment, from effective Kevlar vests and helmets to up-armored Humvees, better able to protect personnel from roadside bombs. Short term readiness is further complicated by this lack of equipment for both deployed and non-deployed units. When non-deployed units don't have the equipment they'll use in combat, their training is less than optimum.

Long term readiness addresses military preparation for the challenge our nation may face tomorrow. It encompasses everything from manpower, training and equipment to pre-positioned stores of military equipment strategically located around the world in case of emergencies; stocks, by the way, that the General Accountability Office (GAO) reports have been virtually drained for Iraq operations. Long term readiness also includes "resetting" the force — putting equipment back the way it was before the war — which will be costly, particularly for the Army and Marine Corps. Not one Army unit in the continental United States — including National Guard — could complete their assigned missions today ... either in combat or in response to natural disasters or attacks here at home.

Roughly half of all the ground equipment the U.S. Army owns is currently in Iraq or Afghanistan. Since the start of the war, the Army has lost nearly 2,000 wheeled vehicles and more than 100 armored vehicles. Harsh desert climate or mountainous terrain, virtually continuous combat and the physical weight of extra armor are wearing out equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan at up to nine times the normal rate.

As bad as things are for the active duty Army, the situation is even worse for the National Guard. The regular Army has lost so much equipment that they're using Guard equipment as replacements. Combined with an historic underfunding, National Guard units are left with about one-third of their equipment.

These urgent equipment shortages hit hard on the military's ability to train. Both Guard and active Army units are forced to prepare and train for deployment with minimal equipment. Much of their equipment is not delivered until they arrive for brief training in Kuwait and Iraq, just before they are thrown into combat.

Iraq has also badly damaged our military recruitment. In 2005, the Army missed its recruiting goal by more than 8%, or almost 6,700 soldiers. Army end strength has been maintained by offering expensive re-enlistment bonuses.

We've also resorted to a "backdoor draft" (extending combat deployments for individuals and units in Iraq) just to retain our current force level. Much of the current escalation will include soldiers essentially "backdoor drafted" for duty, and the use of National Guard and Reserve forces as *de facto* active duty units through multiple, continuous deployments.

Casualties are coming home at the fastest rate since Vietnam. We've never been able to fully meet the demand for health services for our men and women in uniform. Media reports about life in recovery at Walter Reed, the "Crown Jewel" of the Army's medical system, have saddened or angered all who read them. How we treat the men and women who come home from war traumatized in mind or decimated in body reflects badly on us.

We have the finest fighting force in the world. Maintaining that quality means continuing to recruit and retain the best people and training them to the highest standards. The effects of the war in Iraq will take many years to reverse. This presents a strategic gamble for the nation and the forces which protect it. Decreased readiness levels will make it harder to succeed in Afghanistan or Iraq ... or anywhere else.

Make no mistake; the United States is not at war. The United States military is. The burden of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is being carried by our soldiers – and their families. The rest of us simply observe their sacrifice on TV. Congress must reassert its Constitutional responsibility to provide for our armed services, and this must begin with the Armed Services Committees and the Defense Authorization bill.

We pledge a vigorous oversight on behalf of our troops, and for the American people.